

Unlocking
Our Sound
Heritage

BRITISH
LIBRARY

Storage for Sound Collections

#SaveOurSounds



Storage for Sound Collections

The aim of this document is to provide you with general guidance on safely storing the discs, tapes and other audio carriers in your collection. It provides a brief introduction to a complex subject, but contains links to further detailed information at the end.

While the conditions described below apply to the great majority of audio carrier types, it is always a good idea to have a clear understanding of the formats you hold and the materials they are made of, to help you make informed decisions about their general care and handling. Please see the Unlocking Our Sound Heritage leaflet **How to Identify and Care for the Sound Formats in your Collection**.

Storage conditions

A document as short as this cannot offer definitive specifications for the optimal storage of sound carriers, due in part to the wide variation in how they are used in your repository, what the different carrier types are made of, and how they are constructed. As a general rule however, archival storage conditions for audio formats should be clean, dry, and cool, and exposure to daylight should be avoided where possible, to minimise the harmful effects of UV light. Archival storage conditions appropriate to paper-based materials will in most cases be adequate, although the complex composite nature of some sound carriers may require particular conditions. It is strongly recommended that you make use of the bibliography at the end of this document, to further research the needs of the carrier types that you hold.

You may be somewhat limited in the degree to which you can adjust the temperature and humidity conditions of your collection. There is in fact no single ideal temperature or humidity that applies to all carriers, and within certain limits, it is more important to control the stability of these, than it is to try and fix them absolutely. Repeated and uncontrolled fluctuations in temperature and humidity can lead to accelerated degradation compared to an unoptimised, but more stable environment.

Higher humidity will accelerate degradation and encourage mould growth. Similarly, higher temperatures will accelerate the rate of deterioration of most materials. However, one argument against adopting the lowest practicable temperature and humidity settings for your storage area is the need to avoid repeated and rapid changes when moving items into access areas, which are usually higher temperature or humidity environments, optimised for human working conditions. It is important to ensure the formats have time to steadily acclimatise when moved.

The relationship between temperature and humidity is another important factor that should be borne in mind: lowering the temperature in a storage area will raise the humidity, so it is important to ensure that both are monitored and managed actively.

Shelving

All audio formats should be stored upright on shelving; do not pile items on top of each other and avoid trying to squeeze too many together, as this will cause physical stress that may lead to warping or even breakage.

Ensure shelving is sturdy and able to support the weight of your collections. Shellac discs and large tape reels in particular are quite heavy when stacked together.

Keep reel-to-reel, cassette and DAT tapes away from magnetic sources. Magnetic fields generated by power supplies, automatic door locks, vacuum cleaners, loudspeakers and lightning conductors can negatively affect the magnetic information recorded on the tapes, audibly degrading the content.

When handling items, do not touch playing surfaces and ensure your hands are clean.

Boxes and sleeves

In many cases original boxes and sleeves (unless in poor condition) will provide adequate protection, and can play an important role in buffering items from environmental fluctuations. There are however a few rules to observe:

Airtight containers are best avoided as these create a microclimate that can encourage mould growth and accelerate degradation. Mould is a real danger with audio materials, and can be difficult and time-consuming to remediate. It is not uncommon for reel-to-reel tapes to be stored in their boxes inside plastic bags – these bags should be thrown away.

Boxes and sleeves should fit the format comfortably. If it's too tight it will cause unnecessary physical stress, resulting in warping or breakage; if it's too loose, the format may rattle around inside and be more likely to fall out or become get damaged.

Though vinyl discs are physically robust, they are sometimes sleeved in PVC inner sleeves which do degrade over time, and stick to the surface of the LP.

Any PVC sleeve in direct contact with a vinyl disc should be removed and replaced with an acid-free paper or polyester sleeve.

If a box/sleeve does need to be replaced, it is important to document any metadata that they contain, such as content information or technical notes.

Storing your physical sound collections safely and securely is crucial, however to ensure sustainable access to sound recordings, the content held on the physical carriers must be digitised; protecting the physical carriers in storage alone, often known as passive preservation, will not protect the content held on them in the longer term. However, responsible passive preservation is vital to ensure the physical care of carriers and better facilitate transfer and digitisation.

Further information

For more information on storage conditions for audio collections, the following may be helpful:

IASA Technical Committee, Handling and Storage of Audio and Video Carriers, edited by Dietrich Schüller and Albrecht Häfner (= Standards, Recommended Practices and Strategies, IASA-TC 05)
<https://bit.ly/3c9LWkr>

Library of Congress: Care, Handling, and Storage of Audio Visual Materials
<https://bit.ly/2NeNvTu>

BS 4971:2017: Conservation and care of archive and library collections
<https://bit.ly/3bW5nNf>

IFLA Audiovisual and Multimedia Section Standing Committee, Guidelines for Audiovisual and Multimedia Collection management in Libraries, Rev. by Sonia Gherdevich
<https://bit.ly/2XUNJBv>

Collections Trust, Benchmarks in Collection Care
<https://bit.ly/2LNwUpq>